



LITERALLY SPEAKING

The Cheltenham Festival of Literature's Daily Journal

Issue 6 • FREE

edited by Stet Press

Thursday October 17 2002

TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

John Gribbin

Town Hall
1 - 2pm

**Linda Grant &
Jenny Diski**

Town Hall
4 - 5pm

Gordon Banks
Cheltenham Town
Football Club
8 - 9.45pm

This sporting writer

By RACHEL BARWICK

From Mississippi to Montana and finally Cheltenham, acclaimed author Richard Ford made an epic journey to grace this Festival with a rare appearance and to discuss his writing. From readings of his own work to remembering the words of past critics, Ford's softly-spoken Southern gentleman style was a hit with the audience.

Much to the delight of the crowd (all devoted fans, some of whom had travelled from the States), Ford began his discussion with a twenty minute reading of a story from his new book *A Multitude of Sins*. Needless to say, the audience was spellbound by this reading. The story, which was about adultery, was illustrative of Ford's desire to write about the dishonest

aspects of human nature.

Ford certainly did not fail the audience; he managed to discuss everything from his life in Mississippi ('I realised that it wasn't the centre of the world, and it was a horrible place') to his frustrations early on in his career whilst trying to get his work published by the somewhat bitterly-remembered 'doper grad students who only published their friends' work anyway.'

Perhaps the most unforgettable part of this evening was Ford's commentary on the subject matter of his work, which is about 'how people fail each other'. 'These stories take the lid off and look at what makes people go



awry, the small acts that make you fail someone. They are stories about impatience, intemperance and insincerity.' This desire to show the dark and unpleasant aspects of human nature was also clearly evident in the story that Ford read aloud at the start.

Finally, when

Ford's own sincerity was called into question by an audience member - who wondered if he always wrote with moral issues in mind - Ford replied with the utmost conviction 'I would be a fool to say no!'

Breast cancer awareness

By REBEKAH CANE

With October being Breast Cancer Awareness month, Cheltenham Festival of Literature and the Carey Dickenson Fund for Breast Cancer Campaign have joined forces to raise money for research into the illness at today's event featuring Candida Lycett Green & Susan Hill in the Town Hall at 7.30pm.

Candida Lycett Green's book *Over the Hills and Far Away* is a celebration of her recovery from the disease and Mrs Pam Goldberg, director of the charity, will be in attendance.

The charity are hoping to raise £2000 and invite anyone who would like to make a donation to send a cheque, payable to 'CDF for Breast Cancer Campaign' and addressed to Lavinia Sidgwick, Rushbury House Farm, Winchcombe, Cheltenham, GL54 5AE. Collection boxes will also be situated around the Town Hall.

The agony and the comedy

By NIKKI SHEEHAN

Can comic novels touch the parts serious novels can't? A consensus of opinion was unlikely, but it was obvious from the start that these three authors would never agree on the basic nature of comedy.

Jonathan Meades, sardonic Times columnist and author of novels set in Norwood, denied that he intends his novels to be funny at all. 'There are few things I find less funny than comedy,' he claimed, declaring *Fawlty Towers* to be an example of documentary realism. His aim is to write the gruesome truth, including people choking on their own excrement, which people seem to find funny.

Fortunately, both Nigel Williams, BBC arts producer and author of various murderous Wimbledon novels including *Hatchett and Lycett*, and

James Hawes, author of *White Merc with Fins* and *White Powder, Green Light*, both shared an inspirational enthusiasm for comedy. Williams

punctuated the conversation with luvvie-style anecdotes about everyone from Dick Emery to Falstaff and a naked bloke he met at the swimming pool. Hawes, who sets his comedy in his adopted homeland of Wales, mirrored the slower pace of the contented life he leads there which inspires his comedy.

So, what was it all about? Do authors write comedy because the truth is too hard bear? Williams is decisive, 'No. Wit is the joy of life, and comedies are about celebrating and enjoying life.' And what about tackling those difficult topics? Williams and Hawes were not tempted, but Meades was open to the idea, 'Maybe I'll do holocaust jokes when I'm older and misanthropic and nasty... or nastier.'



Nation state

By DAN KOSCHALKA

Tangible sparks flew between novelists Andrew Grieg and Jennifer Johnston, as they explored character creation and effective writing methods. The two confirmed Mac-addicts reassured one another with similar views, despite their superficial differences - Grieg a Scottish climber-turned-novelist, Johnston Irish and a latecomer to writing.

Each writer happily admitted taking inspiration from real-life acquaintances - Grieg suggesting that without such sources, he could not connect with his characters. The concept of character-as-plot-device appealed to neither novelist - 'for the character to truly live, they must interest the writer'. As a slight outsider in the English literary world, Grieg felt his nationality affords him a wider choice of language, while Johnston saw it as an irrelevance. Sadly, time constraints curtailed this debate - it merited at least another hour.

Words in the workplace

BY ADAM HOROVITZ

This year's *voices off* at Cheltenham Festival of Literature has a new series of events which are intended to connect Festival and town in a way that has not been explored previously.

'It's called *Words at Work*,' explained *voices off* director Sara-Jane Arbury. 'This year we invited five poets to come and spend a day in businesses around Cheltenham and write about what they found.'

'In many ways, the events benefit the poets as much as the audience,' added Sara-Jane. 'It allows them access to sights, sounds and ideas which they may not have experienced before.'

All the businesses are thoroughly different – on Monday, Peter Wyton processed through the offices of Kraft Foods; on Tuesday, slam poet Rob Evans took to the airwaves with BBC Radio Gloucestershire; yesterday, weather-girl turned poet Wincey Willis pointed out showers with Kohler Mira; today Ann Drysdale will be perching poetically in Cavendish House and on Friday Claire Williamson will be exchanging barbed verse in a number of hairdressers around Cheltenham.

'The poets then give readings of the work they have come up with during the day,' explained Sara-Jane. 'Ann Drysdale is reading in Café Rouge tonight at 6.15pm and Claire will be reading in Casa at 6.15pm tomorrow.'

The events are free, and if Wincey Willis' reading is anything to go by, the final two should be an off-the-cuff treat. 'I was overwhelmed with information,' Wincey told her audience. 'Mira even have a museum of showers through the ages!'

Her speedily written poems picked up on the quirkiest aspects of the day; the most memorable being a humorous poetic report on the sometimes filthy calls the Help Centre girls receive.

'What can you expect when half your easily-broken products are called knobs?' asked Wincey with a laugh. What indeed?

It just is cricket...

BY JON ANDRIESEN

One of England's finest cricketers and Jonathan Agnew packed out the Town Hall on Wednesday evening, primed with tales and books to sell; they didn't disappoint.

Agnew was first to the crease to explain how 21 of the 22 players – including himself – had played out a drunken Sunday League match. Thinking the game would be abandoned due to rain, all but Gordon Parsons imbibed a little too hard, only to be called back to the pitch with spinning heads.

Michael Atherton has celebrated and subsequently concluded his playing career with his autobiography *Opening Up*. A rare thing these days

for a sportsman to write their own book, but Atherton isn't just any old ex-sportsman. He is at times slow (like his batting), always considered (like his England captaincy) and yet surprisingly dry and witty (for those who can remember his leg-breaks, a bit like that).



Phil Tuffnell, Atherton revealed, once spent the night before a Test Match in a psychiatric ward. Atherton's only dilemma was whether to bat him at 10 or 11. 'I had to put him in at 11 'cause he likes walking back to the pavilion with a mate,' he quipped.

He also remembered how Tuffers had been sledged by an enthusiastic Australian: 'Hey Tuffers, can we borrow your brain. We're building an idiot!'

Is Anybody There?

BY HELEN WILLIAMS

'Watch out for the headless horseman' my cab driver warned as I entered the bustling Prestbury House Hotel. Indeed, ghost archivist Bob Meredith confirmed the rumours with stories (from a choice of twenty eight) which have circulated the most haunted village in Britain for many years. 'Prestbury is gibbering with ghosts,' exclaimed Meredith,



with his ghostly novelty tie flashing at the audience. Perhaps the most intriguing tale was an update on the Grey Lady, Cheltenham's official ghost. A few weeks ago a woman reported to Meredith that she had to slam on her breaks during her driving test because she saw the grey lady ahead of her.

John Burns was up next with a spooky candlelit reading of W.W Jacob's classic *The Monkey's Paw*, which had audience members transfixed. He sat, half in shadow, peering over the top of large spectacles sending shivers down spines.

Manchester's lesbian vampire Rosie Lugosi entertained with the secrets of her sinister life. She performed poetry such as *I was a Vampire Bus Conductor* to humour the audience rather than to scare and then slipped seductively into musical interludes. Dressed in tight PVC trousers and corset, with whip and fiery red hair, Lugosi really takes her role as a vampire to the extreme.

This was a whip-crackingly scary night!

New worlds

BY BECKY OWEN & STUART TURNER

Nicholas Murray and DJ Taylor gave a vibrant and stimulating discussion on Aldous Huxley and specifically his 'social satire' *Brave New World*. Chaired by Alastair Niven, the discussion encompassed Huxley's works, his life, comparisons with other visions of the future and its pertinence to the world today.

The event was part of a series on the relevance of twentieth century literature in the modern age and in the future.

One of the main comparisons was between Orwell's vision of *1984* and Huxley's new world. They both represent dystopias despite being contrasting in their approaches.

The conclusion of the discussion was that we will still be reading *Brave New World* for years to come simply because it poses this pertinent question: 'Have we become the embodiment of the 'inert, passified consumers', as demonstrated in Huxley's Soma-tised concept of the future.'

The Stoat

Festival Officer Adam Pushkin was spotted in the Writer's Room yesterday demonstrating 'googlies' to a select audience. The Stoat was disappointed to learn that 'googly' is simply a cricketering term.

James Hawes claimed that he arrived in Cheltenham late 'because my car wouldn't stop!'

THE TEAM

EDITORS:
Jon Andriessen & Adam Horovitz

ROVING REPORTER:
Daniel Hahn

Contact us on stetpress@hotmail.com
© on articles remains with the authors